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22

INTERFACING SHAKESPEARE ONSCREEN

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Performance, as a medium, interfaces with textual variants, audience expectations, and site-specific arts—artworks produced and consumed at specific physical and social sites. Performances with screens as interface, in particular, create celluloid and digital pathways to various ideologies. As Alexander Galloway theorizes, "today interfaces are often taken to be synonymous with the media themselves" (936), but it is clear that the interface between humans (story-tellers) and machines (technologies of representation) governs the very logic of screened performance as a narrative medium, distilling "material flows [of representations] into concrete action" (Hookway ix). Live theater used to be a synchronous communal affair taking place in an architectural space, while performances on private screens are thought to be more asynchronous, intimate, and individuated. Theater, with modern playgoing conventions, may have a temporarily dampening effect, in that audiences in formal, indoor venues generally do not yell disapproving or appreciative comments during performance. In contrast, screened performances—film or digitized stage productions—can invite more immediate, if not voyeuristic, reactions in verbal or textual forms, since the audiences are physically separated from the space where dramatic action takes place. "Live" performances used to be distinguished from film—a more editorialized medium—by their cachet of being "ephemeral" and irrecoverable. However, these distinctions are going away, because more and more theatrical and filmic performances are mediated by the same screen interface. Through analyses of performances that call attention to filmic genres as well as (meta)theatrical operations in digital and digitized performances, this chapter argues that the screen is a self-reflexive, though often forgotten, interface that promotes collaborations across genres onscreen and onstage.

In the case of Shakespearean performance, the screen interface frequently evokes and reframes other media, including the interfaces of the codex book, television programming, and live or pre-recorded theatrical events. The interface of the screen is now a portal through which audiences experience Shakespeare's narratives with a range of associated artistic elements including costumes, sets, and music. That interface is itself shaped by modern ideologies and the structures of screen genres. Just as "the liberation of writing from the book in digital culture" has "changed the ways we make writing perform" (Worthen 217), the interface of the screen gives the concept of performance new, synchronous and asynchronous meanings. It offers variegated pathways to Shakespeare's plays and to other screen works; in turn, the efficacy of such interfaces is shaped by user participation and reception.

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In fact, these dynamics extend from multiplex screens to the small screens of laptops, television, tablets, home cinemas, smart phones, and other personalized interfaces. The pandemic of COVID-19 has further blurred the distinctions between feature films intended for the multiplex and made-for-television, or made-for-streaming, films in terms of funding structures, aspect ratios, and scope of production. The interfaces and the channels of distribution are merging quickly. Netflix, a purveyor of streaming products, is now a global producer of original contents in the forms of both films and television series. These products are intended for streaming rather than collective consumption in multiplexes. Amazon, having acquired the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer movie company in 2021, is also capitalizing on its Prime Video streaming platform. Amazon Studios have already (co)produced a hundred original films, including Richard Eyre's 2018 *King Lear*, starring Anthony Hopkins in the lead role and streamed as part of Amazon Prime. While "the smaller scope and intimacy of television" aided in the flourishing of television productions in the golden age of Shakespeare on television from 1944 to 1971 (Crowl 14), today's performances onscreen connect different modes of representation. In the golden era of television, most TV versions of Shakespeare were based on successful stage performances, but—due to the lockdown as a public health measure during the pandemic and due to the prevalence of streaming technologies already in place before 2020—there is no longer a hierarchical order of stage-to-television-to-film. Before the pandemic, more and more stage productions had been broadcast live, or in recorded formats, such as the RSC-Live series, to audiences in theaters. Now, an even larger number of born digital, or re-mastered, performances reached audiences directly on the small screen. It is no longer as meaningful to distinguish between "live" productions, multiplex films, and made-for-small-screen films.

It is now commonplace to integrate Shakespeare in traditional film format on the big screen into personalized experiences on the small screen for personal entertainment or for education. In Shakespeare criticism, there is therefore an urgent need to fully integrate the artifact of Shakespeare on the small screen (and screens within Shakespearean performances) "with an individuated integrity" into our overall understanding of Shakespeare's relationships to all kinds of interfaces from screens to the codex book (Desmet 2017). Competing digital interfaces, as Thomas Cartelli observes, "reduce the objective of feature film presentation in fixed screening spaces to one among many reception/display options" (48). With case studies showing how screens big and small have become more than "technologies of performance to concentrate the audience's focus" (Aebischer, *Shakespeare, Spectatorship and the Technologies of Performance* 4), this chapter reveals the central place of screen as interface between the differing universes of characters, performers, and audiences. The screen interface immerses audiences in an alternate universe in such a way that audiences rarely question the screen's aesthetic function. That interface often makes itself transparent even though it is generating the dramaturgical meanings central to the narratives. In some cases, as Richard Schechner predicted in the late 1960s, performance technologies have become "more important than the performers" (44), because the technologies of representation—in our case, the screen—is no longer merely a supporting mechanism but an interface generating new meanings for the narrative.

Interfacing Meta-Cinema

Interface is an important critical concept to understand Shakespeare in world-wide performances, because cinema operates not only as a medium to channel messages from the plays but as an interface among transhistorical and intercultural expressions. The ideological and aesthetic structures of that interface often create new meanings for Shakespeare's works.

Several meta-theatrical films draw on the "screen" as a framing interface between the films' fabula and Shakespeare's fictional universe. Stories told on the smaller screens within these films would not make sense independent of the stories told in the camera's frame. Full stories emerge from the juncture between the performance on the screen-within-the film, such a television set, and the performance within the film's frame.

Ralph Fiennes' 2011 film *Coriolanus* uses the fictional Fidelis TV channel as an interface to connect three key time zones of (1) the 1990s' setting of dramatic action that fuses (2) Elizabethan-era ideologies that are (3) mapped onto a Roman history inspired by Thomas Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* (1579). Set "in a place calling itself Rome" in Serbia, a cinematic space created by the newsreels with references to the Yugoslav Wars, this film leans heavily on the screen-within-the-film as a framing device and interface. Protestors are shown filming, on their cell phones, Coriolanus' (Ralph Fiennes) speech vilifying the plebeians during a conflict at the grain depot. Jon Snow plays himself as a newscaster who interviews various characters while delivering breaking news in Shakespeare's blank verse. Multiple scenes show characters, such as Aufidius (Gerard Butler) or Volumnia (Vanessa Redgrave), glued to a television set in tense, pivotal moments. Appropriately enough, for a film bent on allegorizing the role of public media in modern political life, Coriolanus is banished during a live interview in a television studio. As Jennifer Flaherty argues, the co-presence of media coverage and on-screen action recasts "the viewer as a Roman media consumer" and fuses into one "the television screen and the movie screen" (236). The interface of television news goes far beyond their typical function of silent exposition to become the message itself.

Similarly, monitor screens of intercoms, hand-held video cameras, and television sets play a prominent role in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) which critiques consumer and media-dominated society. The film, set in twenty-first-century New York City, appropriates the trope of despondent urban youths and Buddhist spirituality. Personal memories are displaced onto and by various screens that function as mnemonic and surveillance devices. Hamlet roams around filming random footage using the Fisher-Price Pixel Vision, a toy camera. The First Player's speech about Hecuba in Shakespeare is replaced in this film by a clip of James Dean, a cultural icon of disillusionment, in *East of Eden* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1955), an adaptation based on John Steinbeck. Other examples of screens-within-the-screen abound.

The film contains multiple references to Buddhism through screens-within-the-film, including a clip from Ulrike Koch's documentary about a pilgrimage, *Die Salzmänner von Tibet* (*The Saltmen of Tibet*, 1997), which appears on the back-seat video monitor of Claudius's (Kyle MacLachlan) limousine as he prays. In the moment when the tribesmen pass through the boundary between the secular world and the sacred territory of the salt fields in the documentary, Claudius, who has been praying, covers the screen with his hand and laments the failure of his words to reach Heaven ("what if this hand be blacker than it is with brother's blood" in the film; "What if this cursed hand / Were thicker than itself with brother's blood?" in the play) as he is jolted by a nasty and dangerous swerve. Hamlet is driving the limousine, as chauffeur, without Claudius's knowledge. It is unclear if Hamlet pre-arranged for the screening of Koch's documentary on the back-seat screen, but the parallel story told on the small screen does ironize Claudius's half-hearted prayer.

The interface of screens in the film creates intertextual echoes. Notably in the "to be or not to be" scene, Hamlet's footage of his brooding self gives way to the pacifist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's lecture, trivializing Hamlet's self-indulgence while raising the Buddhist teaching of inter-connectedness as a nobler model. The echoes pitch the individualistic, existential question of being against the Buddhist, community-oriented mode of interbeing. On the television screen, Thich Nhat Hanh offers his teaching on "interbeing": "We have the word to be, but I propose the word to interbe. Interbe. Because it is not possible to 'be' alone. We must interbe with everything and everyone else—mother, father … uncle." It is important to note the interplay among the many screens in Hamlet's room at this moment. Thich Nhat Hanh's words echo repeated video loops of Hamlet reciting the half-line "to be or not to be" while making suicidal gestures. Engrossed in his own footage of an erotic encounter with Ophelia on the hand-held monitor, Hamlet is not looking at the television or listening to Thich Nhat Hanh. The book Ophelia is reading, and with which she partly covers her face, is Jiddu Krishnamurti's *On Living and Dying* (1992) with a portrait of the sage on its cover. The book-on-screen within the film's frame contains intertextual commentary on Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech. Krishnamurti advocates un-learning of preconceptions of the ideas of life and death. In contrast to Hamlet's apprehension of the unknown ("dread of something after death" in the "undiscover'd country"), Krishnamurti argues that the fear of death reflects the fear of losing essential parts of who we are.

Thich Nhat Hanh and Krishnamurti encode spiritualism as sources of wisdom that could redeem Hamlet. The Buddhist meditation highlights the contradictory nature of identities that can be constructed only in opposition to others. The "to be or not to be" speech is familiar enough to most audiences to have an impact and to allow for recognition even when rewritten as interbe. The fragmentary allusions to Shakespeare, via screens-within-the-screen, are part of a process of Shakespearization, the formation of social shorthand (Ridden).

Similar to Almereyda's film, several other films use television news as a framing device. The Singaporean film *Chicken Rice War* (dir. Chee Kong Cheah, 2000) draws its comedic energy from the stage rehearsals and performances of *Romeo and Juliet* and the off-stage life of the actors in the college production. The screen acts not only as an interface between *Romeo and Juliet* (with Singaporean twists) and film audiences but also between *Romeo and Juliet* and the actor-characters within the film's universe and between multiple versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. The film inserts an aspiring television news anchor into its opening sequence and several scenes as he reports on the conflicts between two families who own chicken rice stalls next to each other ("From forth the fatal loins of these two foes, / A pair of star-crossed lovers *choose their chicken rice*"). Against moments where the stage asserts its perceived Shakespearean or local authenticity (students performing in English; an elderly woman singing the story about the "feud" in Cantonese operatic tunes), camerawork and editing (cutting between shots of the failed stage performance and reaction shots of parents interrupting the performance) strive to reclaim the superiority of film over theater.

Chicken Rice War contains attenuated and explicit references to other films. Its opening and closing sequences, narrated by the news anchor, simultaneously parody both the now-clichéd chorus in Shakespeare and the news-anchor-as-chorus in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996). *Chicken Rice War* thrives on the tension between theatricalized presentation (such as play-within-a-play) and verisimilitude in cinematic representation.

In Luhrmann's film, after the composed, dispassionate, deliberately old-fashioned script reading by a female TV news anchor framed by an antiquated television set, a whooshing shot "sucks" the film audience through the mouth of the announcer into a second iteration of the Prologue in "fair Verona" in full action, complete with monochrome footage from police helicopters. The television screen within the film dramatizes the Prologue on three occasions: first, in a detached tone by a female news anchor, before a neutral background, reading from a script; second, by the voice of a male announcer in a low, overly dramatic, ominous but solemn tone against live-action shots; and third, as a print medium in which key words of the Prologue appear as headlines. A soundtrack of Craig Armstrong's "O Verona" accompanies the live-action shots in "fair Verona" in the second iteration of the Prologue. "O Verona" was inspired by Carl Orff's musical setting of the medieval poem "O Fortuna" (as part of his cantata *Carmina Burana*). "O Fortuna" was not available for licensing, and "O Verona," replete with echoes of the motif of "O Fortuna," served as a stand-in. "O Verona" is a spin-off and possibly a parody of "O Fortuna" for both pragmatic and metacinematic reasons.

Luhrmann's film was also parodied by the action-comedy *Hot Fuzz* (dir. Edgar Wright, Universal Pictures, 2007), which features Luhrmann's final scene in a village production staged by bumbling actors with the same soundtrack ("Lovefool" by the Cardigans) and the same costumes as those by Luhrmann. In this case, it is the stage-within-the-film, rather than screen-within-the film, that generates alternative meanings to the main plot. Set in Sandford, Gloucestershire, a fictional "model" village, *Hot Fuzz* is part of Wright's acclaimed tribology of parodies of police drama, zombie narratives (*Shaun of the Dead*, 2004), and apocalyptic stories (*The World's End*, 2013). Sitting on Juliet's "death bed" surrounded by copious candles and three neon-lit crosses, Romeo (Martin Blower, played by David Threlfall), still in his shining knight armor costume from the masked ball, states, with each vowel elongated, that: "A dateless bargain to engrossing death! / … Here's to my love!" as he downs the poison. His unconvincing acting makes it seem as if he was taking a shot of liquor in celebration. After Romeo dies, Juliet (Eve Draper, portrayed by Lucy Punch) wakes up. As she sits up in the same angelic costume with white wings as Claire Danes' in Luhrmann's film, the feathers of her wings are glowing in backlight. She finds a pistol by Romeo's body and points it at her temple. As she pulls the trigger she yells in a cartoonish fashion, "Bang!", although there are no sound effects. The audiences in *Hot Fuzz* consist mostly of elderly villagers who sleep through it. The scene in the theater alternates between front shots of the audiences and long and medium shots of the action on stage. The production in *Hot Fuzz* draws attention to the over-the-top dialogues, stylized visuals, and campy nature of Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*. Despite their incompetence, the actors take their performance seriously in front of audiences in the film's universe.

The trans-medial flow of content (Jenkins 2006: 18) among all of these screens, and screened stage productions, creates a point of convergence where Shakespeare's textual presence, in the forms of allusion and quotation, meets visual representations interfaced by screens.

Interfacing "To Be, or Not to Be"

Widely circulated speeches have also been used as an interface between the main plot and alternative universes to which the characters allude. Similar to screens-within-the-film, this artifact-as-interface operates in a liminal space to connect different narrative universes. For instance, *Hamlet* is merely one of the many sources of inspiration for Almereyda's film. The prince's "to be or not to be" speech itself—in verbal and visual forms—becomes an important interface in the scene analyzed above. Other screen works, such as Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), have been deployed as a key interface between verbal and visual messages. In the Iranian film adaptation of *Hamlet* entitled *Tardid* (Doubt, dir. Varuzh Karim-Masihi, 2009), the archivist Siavash contemplates the parallels between his life and Hamlet as he hangs a framed Farsi text, "to be or not to be," on the wall of his depressing office in a basement. The speech becomes a tangible artifact and a key prop in this scene. The *mise-en-scène* interfaces the verbal message from the soliloquy with the sensation of being trapped in an interstitial space.

A poster of Olivier's film appears as an interface and a gateway in the French film *Ophélia* (dir. Claude Chabrol, 1963). Yvan (André Jocelyn), a spoilt scion of a wealthy family maps his life onto that of Hamlet. Overhearing the French dubbed conversations about the natural and necessary passing of generations (1.2.68–92) from Olivier's *Hamlet*, as he walks past a large poster of the English film, Yvan imagines himself to be mid-century Hamlet upholding some sense of morality amidst industrial actions by factory workers and intellectuals benefiting from the post-war economic boom (Figure 22.1). The film interfaces with French filmic and theatrical traditions, referencing *Hamlet*, Olivier, *Orphée* (dir. Jean Cocteau, 1950), and comedy of manners.

The nouvelle vague (New Wave) film director Claude Chabrol, known as "the French Hitchcock" (Miller 14–18), uses the film to comment on France's identity and economic crisis. In contrast to his *Les bonnes femmes* (1960) which depicts female sexuality through the misadventures of four young women in Paris, *Ophélia*—despite its title—focuses on the son of the factory-owning family Lesurf, Yvan (played by André Jocelyn). Ever so self-indulgent, Yvan wanders the mansion and its grounds reciting poetry. When he stumbles upon Laurence Olivier's film version of *Hamlet* in a local cinema, Yvan sets out to become a Hamlet himself—parallel to how James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus and Goethe's Wilhelm Meister embody select aspects of *Hamlet*. Yvan is a typical protagonist of the New Wave cinema which favors "spontaneous young characters" in "unpolished … film styles" (Neupert xviii).

Ironically, Yvan's arc marginalizes the tangential story of a woman who says repeatedly "Je ne suis pas Ophélia. Je suis Lucy." There is no plot parallel between Lucy's story and that of Shakespeare's Ophelia. The name Ophelia becomes a "free-floating apostrophe" (Peterson 22) in Chabrol's film, because the narrative refers repeatedly to the state of not being Ophelia. Teasing audience's expectations, *Ophélia* names its Shakespearean precedence in its title only to erase Hamlet and Ophelia. The Hamletian motifs—communicated through Olivier's film poster and the prince's speech—serve as an interface rather than originary texts for full adaptation.

It is not atypical to see films, such as *Tardid* and *Ophélia*, that use Shakespearean artifacts as an interface to have a cursory, and oftentimes evasive, relationship to Shakespeare. Hamlet's soliloquy features prominently in *My Left Foot* (dir. Jim Sheridan, Ferndale Films, 1989), a film that dramatizes the life of a character with cerebral palsy, Christy Brown, who struggles with daily speech. During a speech therapy session, Brown's therapist Sheila asks him to learn Hamlet's speech as a strategy to improve his speech impediments. Sheila motivates Brown to recite "to be or not to be" by asking him if he would like to one day be able to "say fuck off more clearly" without "impenetrable" and slurred speech. When asked for his opinion of the Prince of Denmark, Brown says Hamlet is "a cripple" who "can't hack it," before giving in and reciting the speech. Sheila frames Hamlet's speech as an interface, a gateway, to a new world. While Brown initially uses perceived disability (a cripple) to dismiss Hamlet as a possible source of therapy, he eventually achieves clear speech through the exercise.

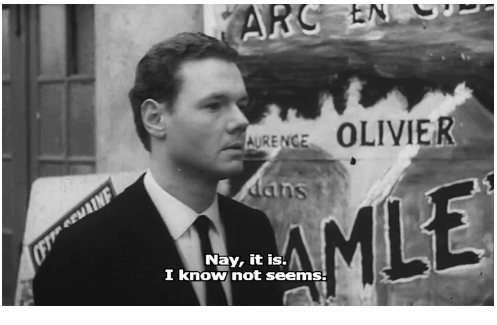

Figure 22.1 Yvan walks past a poster of Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* in Claude Chabrol's *Ophélia* (1963)
Source: Screen grab (DVD).

Eavesdropping on his therapy session, his mother is astonished by the miraculous clarity of his speech. She observes that "there's something in that voice that disturbs me. It's not like him. It has too much hope." Similar to other films about vocal disability, *My Left Foot* "plays the supercrip angle" with a reparative tagline that indicates it's a film "about life, laughter, and the occasional miracle" (Riley 84). The scene interfaces with a philosophical investment in Shakespeare's therapeutic value by dramatizing how even patients with voice disorder can recite the lines from Shakespeare.

In another film, the line "to be or not to be" is given a parodic spin. John McTiernan's *Last Action Hero* (1993) depicts the adventure of Danny Madigan (Austin O'Brien), a schoolboy who is a fan of the action film hero Jack Slater (Arnold Schwarzenegger). When Danny's English teacher screens the scene of Hamlet's soliloquy from Laurence Olivier's film, a bored Danny envisions the scene as it should be played, starring a Terminator-esque Slater in Olivier's costumes, who smashes his way through stalled moments in *Hamlet* without hesitation. Recast in the role of Hamlet, Slater asks himself, "to be or not to be?" Lighting up the cigar in his mouth, he declares "not to be" as he ignites explosives without hesitation, killing all the characters in *Hamlet.* The scene is an example of how films interface other modes of presentation. Olivier's psychological realism and clichéd theatrical style of performance on screen are overwritten by the schoolboy's imagination that draws on more contemporary cultural reference points. James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* made Schwarzenegger a bankable global star in 1991, two years before the release of *Last Action Hero*.

Screening the Penumbra

"To be or not to be" as an interface is one of the many nodes that narratives pass through; it is no longer a point of origin, or destination, for story-telling. The interface evokes a heterotopia (Foucault), a universe within the film's universe. As a gateway to parallel narratives, the interface mirrors and destabilizes the world within and without, giving multiple layers of meanings to the main plot. The interface creates a penumbra around the work.

These uses of screens-within-the-film or Shakespearean artifacts as an interface anticipate the Wooster Group's meta-media and multi-media stage production of *Hamlet* (dir. Elizabeth LeCompte, 2007), in which the actors projected onstage a filmed version of Richard Burton's performance in a 1964 *Hamlet* (dir. John Gielgud) on the Broadway. Burton's onscreen Hamlet ghosts Scott Shepherd's onstage Hamlet. In addition to the 1964 *Hamlet*, which is playing on a big screen upstage as pre-recorded material, another smaller screen is present downstage. The smaller screen, standing behind the actors but in front of the large screen, shows a live video stream of their action primarily in the form of close-up shots of their faces (Figure 22.2). Actors speak the same lines synchronously with Burton's performance. On some occasions, the soundtrack from Burton's video contributed to uncanny dual soundtracks of live and pre-recorded speeches. On other occasions, the actors appeared to be ventriloquizing, or mouthing, lines from Burton's video, because the louder soundtrack of the project drowned out the stage action.

An additional layer of screened meanings emerged during the pandemic, in April, 2020, when the Wooster Group streamed a 2013 video recording of their production online for free. The screen as an interface in 2020 did not work as well as its 2013 production when the concept was a novelty, because, in 2020, at-home audiences—easily distracted—lose connections with the characters and meta-characters. It did not help either that at-home audiences could only "watch through a single static camera." Juggling Shepherd's and Burton's now competing onscreen presence, some critics found that "the lack of emotion" became

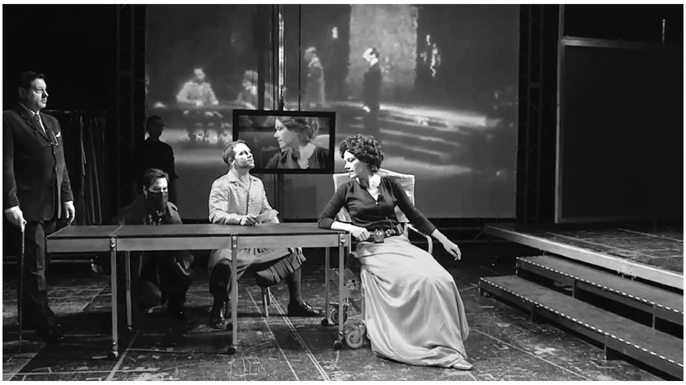

Figure 22.2 Ari Fliakos's Claudius and Kate Valk's Gertrude in front of the two screens, with stagehands to the left, in Wooster Group's *Hamlet*, 2007
Source: Screengrab (freely available video released on Vimeo by Wooster Group).

"tiresome" despite the "striking spectacle's … playful demonstration of control" (Wyver). This is a case of failed interfacing of Shakespeare onscreen.

Like a penumbra, Burton's performance forms concentric circles around the Wooster Group's production, befitting *Hamlet*, the "spectral play" (Callens 539). It also becomes a pretext, as the poster of Olivier's film does in *Ophélia*, for artistic recycling and creativity. The screen-as-interface evokes discrete plot elements in parallel universes and casts a penumbra around the film or production. When light is shed over an opaque object, it casts a shadow with a partially shaded outer region. Judith Buchanan theorizes that in this manner adaptations contain a "textual penumbra" (10), a body of extra-textual information that is closely associated with the work and enriches its meanings. An innocuous penumbra could be audiences' awareness of previous works by the artist, as in the case of Burton's Hamlet ghosting the Wooster Group's stage work. A more intrusive penumbra could be directors' statements on record or the significance of the venue.

All the World's a Digital Screen

Just as film screenings re-enact site-specific meanings connected to the works' historical contexts, digital video archives are also informed by their own site specificity in terms of the cultural locations of curatorial labor and the consumption of the archival materials at points of access (Lim 201). A digital performance video produced in London but consumed in, for example, Abu Dhabi, carries with it culturally-specific meanings of these locations. These meanings are filtered and enabled by the screen as interface. Building on the preceding sections on the screen-within-the-performance as an interface, this section turns to the dynamics of the digital screen itself as a screening interface on commercial and open-access platforms. Viewing digital Shakespeare as a performed event—whether asynchronous or synchronous—connects the concepts of re-play to liveness in performance.

Site-specific meanings of drama take a disembodied form in digital videos. As a form of instantaneous, inter-connected communication, the digital video is non-linear and non-sequential in nature. My research indicates that digital video has the unique ability to "support instant access to any sequence in a performance, as well as the means to re-order and annotate sequences, and to bring them into meaningful conjunction with other videos, texts and image collections" (Joubin 39).

The digital video as an interface gained increased significance when the outbreak of the global pandemic of COVID-19 closed live theater events and cinemas worldwide. Due to lockdown orders and restrictions on travel as public health measures, audiences—trapped at home—took to streaming to engage with Shakespeare as a familiar classic. The pandemic has led to a proliferation of born-digital and digitized archival videos of Shakespeare in Western Europe, Canada, the UK and the US. Key players included the Berliner Ensemble, La Comédie Française, the Globe Theatre in London, the Royal Shakespeare Company, National Theatre, Stratford Festival in Canada, and the Folger Theatre in Washington, D.C. Digital streaming—live or pre-recorded—has helped Shakespeare go viral on a global scale.

The Royal Shakespeare Company took digital performance one step further by enabling live, audience interaction with the actors through the screen as interface. In March, 2021, the RSC launched an innovative one-hour musical show online, *Dream* (dir. Robin McNicholas), which was inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Using live capture and gaming technologies, the camera took online audiences backstage and onstage before going into a virtual reality environment (Figure 22.3).

Viewers follow an actor backstage in a motion-capture suit and witness her transformation into Puck, a digitally produced avatar onscreen. Her movements are transformed into the avatar's limb movements. The show draws on a kinetic, rather than verbal, energy, as actors do not speak. For *Dream*, the screen is the very venue and meaning-making agent where performative meanings arise; it is far more than a piece of technology to transmit performances to audiences. The movements of fairies generate live sound and music. Cobweb is represented as close-up shots of Maggie Bain's staring eyeball. Wearing motion capture sensors over her suit, E.M. Williams is transformed into Puck, a figure that wanders the night as an assemblage of pebbles in the shape of a human body. Audiences follow her through computer-generated forests and landscapes. On Tuesday, March 16, 2021, more than 7,000 ticket holders logged on to watch the show live, some of whom used the interactive feature by clicking on firefly icons to light up the path for Puck. The fireflies, however, were ornamental, as they did not have any direct impact on the performance or Puck's movement.

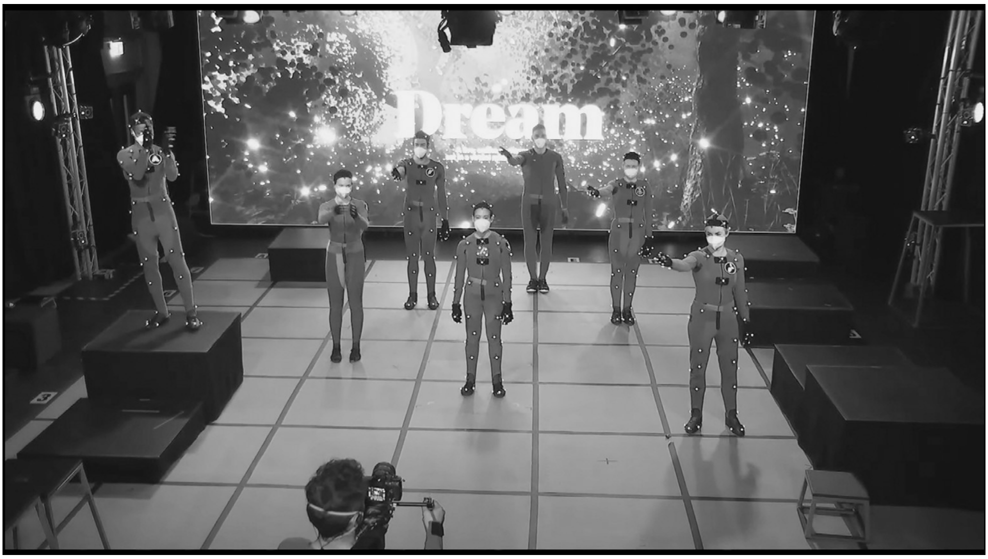

Figure 22.3 Dream, directed by Robin McNicholas, Royal Shakespeare Company Online, March 2021
Source: Screen grab (live streaming).

The highlight was the show's global reach. Questions came in from all over the world, from as far as Melbourne, during the post-show discussion session. The global visibility and huge turnout were welcome news for the RSC, but the technological wonders failed to woo some critics. *The New York Times* called it "a small copse of some really lovingly rendered trees." *The Guardian* acknowledges the technology could well be "a new arrow for the quiver of live theatre" while critiquing the show's lack of "an emotional dimension" (Clapp 2021; Soloski 2021).

COVID-19 accelerated the global processes of interfacing Shakespeare onscreen. Theater director Erin B. Mee writes optimistically that the pandemic has created "an exciting new performance environment," bringing artists and audiences together "from numerous nations" and creating "new possibilities for collaboration." Digital forms of video communication have enabled "artists from around the world" to gather in virtual spaces "playing to international audiences rather than … to people who can get to a particular piece of real estate" (Mee and TDR Editors 208–9). Thanks to Zoom, TikTok, and other platforms, any performance is now potentially a global event. For their participatory performance of *The Tempest*, Creation Theatre and Big Telly Theatre companies used the tagline: "live, interactive, and in your living room" anywhere in the world (2020), which is only possible through the screen as interface. When the Public Theatre in New York launched the *Brave New Shakespeare* Challenge (2020), they shared videos of their actors reading act 2 scene 2 of *Romeo and Juliet* in multiple languages, and invited the general public to share their own. The initiative has a global outlook, as evidenced by its emphasis of multilingual, user-created contents.

One reason for Shakespeare's global popularity on digital media, as W.B. Worthen surmises, is its status as comforting, familiar go-to-material for uplifting the spirits during the pandemic (cited in Soloski 2020). Shakespeare skyrocketed to the top of the list of digital performance events during the pandemic in the forms of memes, quotable quotes about Shakespeare and the plague, and performances of select scenes.

As measures to contain spread of the virus, the lockdown and stay-at-home orders have accelerated digital globalization with the screen as a key interface, redefining liveness along the way. As Pascale Aebischer suggests, as a "chronological order" that seems to slow down time ("Viral Shakespeare," 2020b), the lockdown motivates at-home audiences to break free of the limit of their temporality by engaging in escapism. Mobility is limited, even within one's own neighborhood. By late April 2020, 54 percent of the global population (4.2 billion people) were subject to complete or partial lockdowns (WHO). Audiences "bounded in a nutshell" (*Hamlet* 2.2.273) seek virtual connections that transport them beyond their now fixed geographic locations to an alternative universe.

Digital broadcasting is nothing new, for, in the past decade, prominent organizations such as the Metropolitan Opera and the Barbican Centre have broadcast their programming to theaters and cinemas around the world, both live and pre-recorded. In the summer of 2017, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts broadcast in real-time Washington National Opera's performance of *Aida* (dir. Francesca Zambello) to the Nationals Park in Washington, D.C. (Midgette). Both the audiences in the Kennedy Center and those in the baseball stadium enjoyed the show live—the former in the same space as the singers and the latter synchronously in a different space. These indoor and open-air digital performances remained "live," communal experiences.

The new genre of born-digital performances has redefined the notion of liveness as "a temporal and spatial entity" (Sullivan). The global pandemic has further expanded the idea of liveness. Asynchronous digital videos do not so much replicate theatrical experiences as they enable experiential and affective immersiveness on personal electronic devices for private consumption. Blurring the boundary between film and theater, both genres are detached from the palpable bodily presence of actors. Notably, viewers' own subjectivity is also disembodied (Aebischer, "Viral Shakespeare").

Digital video has been a godsend for theater companies during the prolonged pandemic. Artists and fundraisers tapped into digital video to maintain their visibility and increase the arts' relevance to society. Their focus turned from playgoers in the physical playhouses to at-home audiences around the world. Some companies released pre-recorded performances on a time-limited basis on pre-scheduled intervals to drum up excitement. The sense of exclusivity paralleled the ephemerality and limited availability of live theater. Some events were free. Others sold tickets at a fraction of the price of live shows. In rural Virginia, the Blackfriars Playhouse, part of the American Shakespeare Center, moved their 2020 season online to their proprietary streaming platform called BLKFRSTV.

The pandemic has caused grief and damage to social infrastructures, but it has also helped a few theater companies reach mass, global audiences on an unprecedented scale. By May 18, 2020, the London Globe had already garnered 1.9 million viewers on their YouTube channel, which was cited by Neil Constable, chief executive of Shakespeare's Globe, as evidence of the "huge appetite for culture at a time of national crisis" when they bid for support from the UK's Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sports during the lockdown (cited in Dams). The Globe is unique among British theaters in that it had a predominantly international, tourist audience base even before the pandemic.

Theater seating capacity was no longer a concern. The Donmar Warehouse's *Coriolanus* (dir. Josie Rourke, 2013), starring Tom Hiddleston, on "National Theatre at Home" attracted more than half a million views and raised US$20,691 between 4 and 11 June 2020. Significantly, this was a 2013, rather than a new, production that the organizers brought online during the pandemic. The number of online participants far exceeded the number of audiences a live production could ever reach within the same one-week period. The Donmar auditorium has only 251 seats; even the National Theatre has a total of only 2,417 seats across its three venues.

The key takeaways from digital theater in the era of COVID-19 are expanded notions of liveness and site-specific epistemologies. The site of live performance is distinct from the site where at-home audiences experience that performance—mediated by technologies of representation and their computer screens as interface. The rise of the screen as interface expands the notion of performance beyond brick-and-mortar buildings. Financial gains remain ancillary to online performances during the pandemic, because not all productions translate well to digital streaming. The theaters' global digital footprint is a symbolic means to connect with their patrons and to maintain the companies' cultural capital.

Conclusion

Three observations can be made about these instances of interfacing Shakespeare onscreen. First, the screen as interface has created deep structural connections among even works that seem to be isolated instances of artistic creation. The connections extend through the cultural practice of interfacing different media, such as film, theater, or visual arts. The cases above relate more frequently to one another, through the screening interface, than to Shakespeare as sanctified source material.

Second, these works are products of meta-cinematic and meta-theatrical operations and contestations among genres for primacy. The meanings of these narratives are shaped by the interface between disparate genres. Without reproducing Shakespeare's story or engaging directly with Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, Chabrol's *Ophélia* references a poster of Olivier's film as part of a network of cross-references. The archetype of Hamlet is deployed to capture the figure of the despondent in distinctively local contexts. The poster as an interface evokes Olivier's and Hamlet's universes and adds nuanced meanings about self-indulgence to the film *Ophélia*.

Third, as Terence Hawkes argues, phrases and ideas from *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* have been so deeply embedded in everyday speech that it operates simply as "a web of quotations" and a "universal cultural [and] social shorthand" (4). The "to be or not to be" speech is familiar enough to serve as an interface between a character's suffering and an index of intelligence. This interface culture has given rise to digitally enhanced global Shakespeare performances.

While in the 1990s, audiences typically encountered Shakespeare for the first time through film or theater, in our times the initial encounters occur predominantly on digital platforms in the form of video clips, memes, or quotes. It has become more common for non-professional readers and audiences to encounter Shakespeares in fragmented forms. "To be or not to be," even in fragmented forms and out-of-context quotations, carries weight and shifts the meanings of some characters' action. All of this is made possible by the screen as interface that connects what Linda Hutcheon calls the hypertexts, texts with embedded allusions, and hypotexts, texts that inspire subsequent works (121).

The screen as interface links the disparate meanings of Shakespeare in different locations. The pandemic has highlighted further the importance of networks of instantaneous cross references as well as localized, embodied knowledge about Shakespeare. The interfaces of screen-within-performances and digital screens further contribute to this repertoire of evolving, shared knowledge. The interface-driven screen culture has de-centered Shakespeare's singularity—the perceived infinite value of the canon—by turning Shakespearean artifacts into a heterotopia. To further our understanding of Shakespeare in the post-pandemic era, it is important to engage with this interface that informs many works.

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THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF SHAKESPEARE AND INTERFACE

The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Interface provides a ground-breaking investigation into media-specific spaces where Shakespeare is experienced. While such operations may be largely invisible to the average reader or viewer, the interface properties of books, screens, and stages profoundly mediate our cognitive engagement with Shakespeare.

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